

# Press response to Biden's Ireland visit underscores sharp tensions in UK government

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Joe Biden's visit to Ireland on the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement ending The Troubles was a muted affair. The response in the UK media was anything but.

Biden went through the standard agenda of visiting US presidents, following in the footsteps of John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama and Bill Clinton, who all made a show of tracing their Irish roots. As ever, cold political-economic calculations were cloaked in the language of cherished ancestry and common histories of struggle for freedom, democracy and so on. The "ties that bind" Ireland and America are real enough, but they are greenback green, not emerald.

In his speech to the Oireachtas (bicameral parliament) in Dublin, Biden combined the usual flowery phrases with references to what was really being celebrated: the vast investment of US corporations in Ireland, taking advantage of its low taxes and position in the European Union's (EU) single market. The president spoke alternately of toiling "in the vineyards of democracy" and "\$1 trillion in bilateral trade and investment in 2021".

The second string to Biden's visit was to encourage the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to end its boycott of the Northern Ireland Assembly over post-Brexit agreements regulating trade through the province between Britain and EU member state Ireland. The US is concerned to nip in the bud any instability which would not only interrupt its lucrative operation in Ireland, but risk deeper divisions between the UK and EU when Washington is anxious to preserve unity, especially over the war against Russia in Ukraine.

Its goal was pursued with a light touch, with Biden's visit full of implied criticisms of the UK Conservative government for unduly prioritising relations with the unionist bourgeoisie. It was delivered with an intention

of not making it more difficult for Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to rein in the DUP and his own right-wing by too openly siding with the Republic of Ireland and the EU.

Biden's first stop in Belfast on Tuesday was kept tightly controlled. He spent barely eight waking hours in the region and delivered just one 20-minute speech in which he made overtures to the unionists and dangled the carrot of billions of dollars of US investment in a "stable" Northern Ireland.

By Biden's standards, his next three days in the Republic were largely on-script and trouble free, with the exception of an accidental reference to the Irish rugby team beating the "Black and Tans" (the British paramilitary force used to brutally repress the Irish population during its war of independence) instead of the New Zealand rugby team, the All Blacks.

Mentions of Britain and the crisis in Northern Ireland were very limited. The furthest he went was to say he thought "the United Kingdom should be working closer with Ireland" to "support the people of Northern Ireland," acknowledging it was "presumptuous of me to say from the United States."

Even these somewhat cautious and pro-forma remarks met with a storm of denunciations in the sections of the press closest to the Tory government.

The *Telegraph* complained, "Joe Biden has gravely insulted Britain", "Defenceless Ireland should be ashamed of itself" and "Britain needs to stop fawning over the one-sided 'special relationship'".

The *Spectator* opined, "Joe Biden's hostility to Britain only harms the United States" and "Biden can no longer afford to indulge Irish nationalism".

The *Daily Mail* wrote, "Joe Biden cheerfully posed for pictures with an IRA terrorist. Any unionist with an ounce of sense knows he's NOT their friend," and "Joe Biden's lack of grip is deeply worrying".

All gave extensive coverage to every DUP member they could find attacking Biden as “anti-British”, someone who “hates the UK”, and for being “pro-republican” and “meddling” in Northern Irish politics.

These comments confirm serious inter-imperialist tensions between the US and the UK over America’s insistence that Britain get its house in order in Northern Ireland, whatever must be conceded to the EU and whatever the protestations of the DUP, with which Washington has next to no sympathy.

Dean Godson spelled out the grievances most clearly in the *Spectator*, writing, “The US could afford its indulgence of Irish nationalism during the Clinton years because the world was a less dangerous place in the immediate post-Cold War era”. Now “America needs real allies again” and “the UK is an infinitely more important partner for the US in maintaining world stability than the still neutral Republic of Ireland”.

Touting Britain’s larger population, economy, armed forces, nuclear weapons, support for the war in Ukraine, espionage abilities and position on the UN Security Council, he concluded, with a nod to French President Emmanuel Macron’s recent comments in China, “Crucially, the grand strategic choice made by this government has been to cease any hint of hedging on the China question”.

Mired in economic crisis—the UK is predicted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to be the worst-performing of the 20 biggest economies, including Russia, in 2023—and facing the breakdown of every aspect of its social and economic infrastructure, the ruling class is desperate for more from its “special relationship” with the world’s largest economy. It was bitterly reported during Biden’s trip that a possible trade deal with the US, the central promise held out by the pro-Brexit campaign led by Boris Johnson, was still being kicked into the long grass.

Significant sections within ruling circles are angry and feel entitled, especially in return for Britain’s involvement in the war against Russia in Ukraine, where it has played the role of lead provocateur, confirmed by the recently leaked Pentagon documents, and carried out much of the dirty work of intervention.

Former infantry commander Colonel Richard Kemp wrote in the *Telegraph* in an almost spitting rage that Ireland’s “unwillingness to increase defence spending smacks of timorousness akin to the Republic’s

approach to Nato. Ireland has never been a member, yet it is happy to in practice shelter behind Nato’s shield, and especially Britain’s.”

The “right thing to do” he went on, “would be to properly recompense Britain for its protection.”

But everybody, including these authors, knows that the US-UK relationship is not one between equals. If the UK’s demand is “we deserve more from you”, American imperialism’s rejoinder is “we expect nothing less from you... and more, when it comes to Ireland.” That the response has been so fierce in the last week is an indication of the deep crisis of British imperialism and the Sunak government, which remain impaled on the horns of Brexit and its consequences.

While the prime minister was able to push the recent Windsor Framework agreement with the EU through parliament without a major rebellion, the Brexit wing of his party is still a significant force and holds the DUP’s ability to blow up the Northern Ireland Assembly as a trump card in British politics. Its views were given voice by seven-week prime minister Liz Truss, who used a speech at the Heritage Foundation in the US to champion her vision of Brexit and complain that it “didn’t just face coordinated resistance from inside the Conservative party or even inside the British corporate establishment. We faced it from the IMF and even from President Biden.”

Former prime minister Boris Johnson, similarly aligned, still lurks in the background.

Too big a reconciliation with the EU over Northern Ireland will swell their influence in the Tory Party. But this is precisely what is demanded by US imperialism. Biden’s visit has highlighted the unresolved tensions in the ruling Conservative party on which the Sunak government sits, and which have brought down two Tory leaders already in the last year. It has emphasised the extent of the Tories’ reliance on the Labour Party and the trade unions who are suppressing opposition in the working class which should overwhelm such a weak government—even to stay in office.



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